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# Blogging to enhance reflective and collaborative learning

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**Abstract**

This study explored the educational benefit and value of blogging by postgraduate nursing students registered for Masters in Nursing Education in order to become professional nurse educators. The researcher assumed that blogging could improve collaborative learning among postgraduate students and enhance reflective practice skills. Critical reflection on experiences is envisaged to allow lecturers and students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. Salmon's five-stage model of online learning was used as it can provide valuable insight into how blogs can be utilised in online learning. The whole class was trained to set up group blogs by colleagues from the Centre for Innovative Educational and Communication Technologies at the university. Within their blogs they engaged with issues relating to curriculum development, also giving own reflections on these issues. Students were assessed on how well they reflected and commented on specific topics, concepts and principles. The students were initially challenged by this activity and seemed frustrated by low levels of engagement with colleagues within their blogs. The facilitator noticed adequate engagement in two of the three group blogs, where the students exchanged thoughts and ideas and shared experiences. On reflection, they expressed very positive attitudes toward use of blogs as a platform to reflect on their learning and teaching. The blog of the third group of students was dormant, with very limited activity. It is important that facilitators carefully select appropriate technological tools or strategies for teaching and learning, and do not assume that students will be comfortable with the technology even after training and preparation.

**Keywords:** Blogging, nurse educators, reflective practice, reflective learning, cooperative learning.

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## Introduction

Nursing practitioners and educators are encouraged to engage in or promote reflective practice among their students. This study explored the value of blogging as a mediating tool for learning by postgraduate nursing students registered for the Master's in Nursing Education at the University of the Western Cape in order to qualify as nurse educators. The postgraduate nursing students were previously expected to be actively engaging in the online discussion forums set up in the university Learning Management System (LMS). Acknowledging the previous frustrations expressed by the students with access to the university LMS, the researcher decided to explore a different platform with similar affordances but not bound by the constraints of the LMS.

Blogging using Google Blogger was selected as a mediating tool to facilitate collaborative learning and reflective practice among the students, as these are necessary skills to develop clinical reasoning and decision making. Students were assessed on how well they reflected and commented on specific topics, concepts and principles related to the topics under discussion. The facilitator could assess the students' use of higher-level thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) in their blogging, and also how well students' blogging entries demonstrated a personal connection with the topic and relevant literature as they debated on curriculum development issues.

Blogging is defined as the act of individuals (called 'bloggers') who are involved in the process of communicating on weblogs, or blogs (Blackstone, 2009). Blogs are defined by Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) as online journals where an author (or authors) publishes a series of chronological, updateable entries or posts on various topics, typically of personal interest to the author/s, and often expressed in a strongly subjective voice, on which readers are invited to comment. A blog resembles a personal website, but differs mainly in two ways: (a) with respect to the ease of its set up, management and maintenance, and (b) in the fact that blogs include an interactive function, which allows readers of a particular piece of writing (called a blog post) to leave a written response or reader's comment (Blackstone, 2009).

Farmer et al. (2008) assert that blogs offer a socially situated, student-centred, contemporary technical solution, and cater for individual self-expression and socially driven learning. The owners of the blogs (bloggers) express their own personal ideas and views through online publication, while at the same time and as part of the same process engaging in social networks of interactive contact and exchange through the blog posts (Farmer et al., 2008; Blackstone, 2009). Pedagogically successful and valuable blogs involve careful planning and consideration (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003).

Professional nurses and nurse educators are encouraged to engage or promote reflective practice in their students. The goal of using blogs in nursing education is to enhance critical reflective dialogue within a constructivist and intersubjective environment. Critical reflection on experiences is envisaged to allow facilitators to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their students (Yang, 2009).

The blogging activities in this study were designed to provide each nursing student with more opportunities to share ideas with classmates and the facilitator on the module content, to reflect on what was being learned, and to practice and refine written communication skills. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) suggest three stages in the reflective process: i) the student anticipates the experience and mentally prepares for it; ii) the student is actually exposed to the real world (in the clinical environment) and tries to integrate this with classroom work; and iii) the student tries to make sense of the experience.

The mere fact of having experience will not guarantee that learning takes place; the student's response to the experience is more important. Reflection is therefore an activity in which students recapture their experiences, think about them, mull over and evaluate the experiences. This process entails "critically reviewing experience from practice so that it may be used to inform and change future practice in a more positive way... openly examining one's practice, and consequently requires courage, open-mindedness" (Bulman, Lathlean & Gobbi, 2012).

The guiding research question was phrased as: What are the benefits of blogging as a mediating tool to enhance reflective learning?

**Methodology**

The target population constituted of postgraduate students registered for the first-year Master of Nursing (Education speciality) degree. The target population constituted the sample, and the total number of students was 11.

Salmon's five-stage model of online learning (Figure 1) was selected to frame this study as it can provide valuable insight into how weblogs can be utilised in an online learning environment (Salmon, 2000). This model describes how the levels of interaction between students increase as they move through the five stages of the model. At each stage of the model, the technical elements of that particular stage are shown. As the learning progresses through each of the five stages, the amount of interactivity is also expected to increase.

Stage 1 involves setting up of the system and ensuring that the students can access the technological platform. The role of the facilitator would be to ensure a welcoming online environment for the students and to encourage them to be comfortable in use of the system. In Stage 2 the students familiarise themselves with each other and the facilitator will build 'bridges' between social, cultural and learning environments. The students get accustomed to sending and receiving messages from peers and the facilitator. The more they interact online, the more their levels of confidence and stimulation should increase; this occurs at the individual's own pace.

In Stage 3 the students would feel more comfortable to personalise their online space and interact more as they search for and share information. Their sense of belonging to the group may be increasing as their confidence with the online space increases. The role of the facilitator would be to facilitate and support the students as they engage with the learning material. Stage 4 involves knowledge construction.

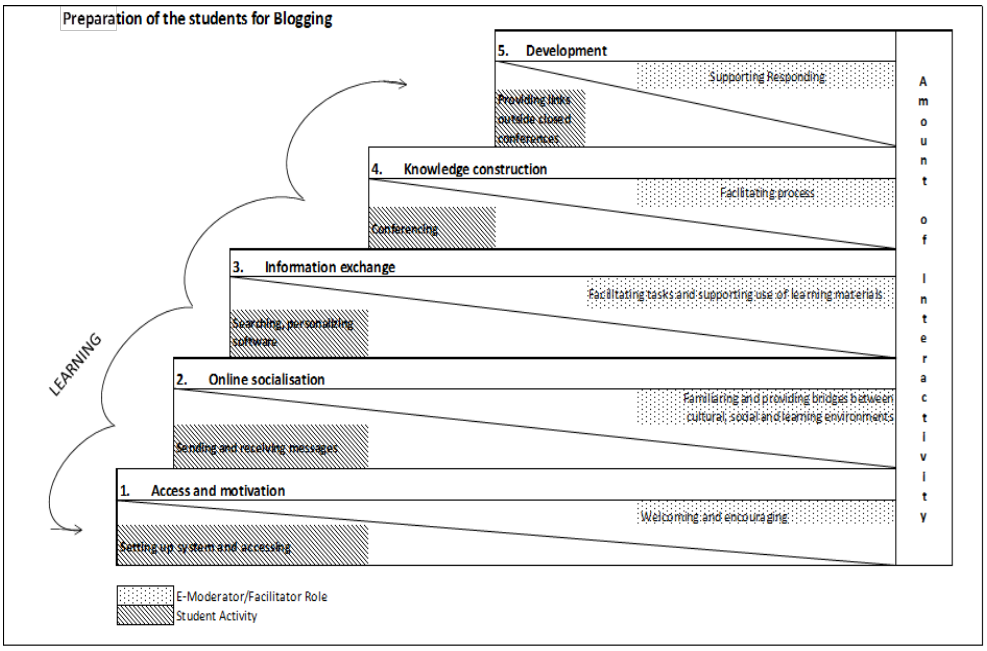


**Figure 1:** Salmon's five-stage model of online learning (reproduced from Salmon, 2000).

Here the students start constructing their own knowledge and assist one another as they engage with information. Students take control of their own learning and should handle their own group dynamics. The educator facilitates the knowledge construction process. In Stage 5 the students become responsible for their own learning and for their group as well. They also become self-reflective as they critically engage in the online discussions and eventually achieve self-actualisation in the online learning environment.

The blogging activity was linked to the module Curriculum Development which is offered in the second semester of the first year of the programme. They divided themselves into three groups. Each group was to work on a group project to be handed in towards the end of this module. Each group was to develop a curriculum based on their own choice. All of the students were prepared for the blogging activity. This necessitated negotiating with colleagues from the university's Centre for Innovative Educational and Communication Technologies (CIECT) to offer training and support. Each group of students was assisted to set up their own blogs. The technicians were available for assistance when needed and also provided 'help' files and other relevant troubleshooting information.

Using Salmon's model, in Stage 1 all students were orientated to blogging by members of CIECT. The educational blogging strategy focused on student learning and the process of reflection. Each group of students was assisted to set up their own blogs and to make a post to their weblog each week for a 14-week period. Other students were expected to engage in discussions on these topics.The technicians

were available for assistance as outlined above. Students were also encouraged by the module facilitator (e-moderator) to set up their own individual blogs. They would use these blogs for their own personal development and would decide who they would allow access to.

In Stage 2 students were informed that the main pedagogic objective was to reflect upon and discuss module content and/or issues arising out of their learning experiences. They were free to use their blogs in whatever way they wished and could write in a style and manner of their own choice, as long as it was in English and didn't contain offensive and/or inflammatory content. They were to post regularly, at least once a week on average, and to engage with other students' blogs on specific topics through comments and hyperlinks. Student-student interaction (collaborative learning) was one of the objectives of the blogging exercise. Students invited their peers to visit their blog and post comments on the topic under discussion. Commenting on other people's entries was a requirement for the assessment. The researcher was the facilitator of the class and assumed the role of the e-moderator in accordance with Salmon's model. The facilitator (e-moderator) ensured that all students were participating in the online community.

In Stage 3 **t**he students personalised their blogs by adding pictures to their profiles and editing various settings. They were guided through this process by the facilitator (e-moderator). To ensure optimal participation and learning outcomes it was decided to integrate blogging into the module as a formative assessment exercise. A set of criteria was provided for marking of the exercise. Students were asked to maintain the blog throughout the 14 weeks of the semester, focusing on identified topics that emerged from the seminars and literature.

In Stage 4 the students began to use their blogs to discuss selected issues relating to curriculum development and shared their progress on their group project. The levels of interaction between students were higher at this point, as they gave feedback to one another by leaving comments on one another's blogs. The facilitator (e-moderator) continued to facilitate this process (observe, coach, encourage interaction). In the last stage students became responsible for their own learning. However, it was found that only two of the three groups were responsible for their learning because the third group was not actively participating in blog discussions.

The students set up group blogs wherein they engaged with issues relating to curriculum development among themselves, also giving own reflections on these issues in relation to their personal experiences. Students were expected to reflect on their personal learning experiences and to add comments and links on the blogs of other students as they engaged in debates and discussions. This further enhanced their collaborative learning. The facilitator would read their blog entries and respond by asking trigger questions that would lead them to explore other areas they might not have thought of. Students' engagement on blogs was assessed using rubrics.

Blogging was used as a mediating tool to facilitate collaborative learning and reflective practice among the students, as these are necessary skills to develop clinical reasoning and decision making. Students were informed that they had to reflect upon and discuss module content and/or issues that arose out of their learning experiences. They were free to use their blogs in whatever way they wished, and could write in a style and manner of their own choice, as long as it was in understandable English and didn't contain offensive and/or inflammatory content. They were to post regularly – at least once a week on average – and to engage with other students' blogs on specific topics through posting comments and hyperlinks.

*Data analysis*

The analysis of the blogs set up by the students focused on how well they reflected and commented on specific topics, concepts and principles related to curriculum development. The level of engagement in the discussions was analysed as well as how well their blogging entries demonstrated a personal connection with the topic and relevant literature.

The blog postings were analysed and discussed with another colleague facilitating the programme. Conclusions were made on how well the students reflected and commented on specific topics, concepts and principles related to the topics under discussion. The facilitator could assess how well students' blogging entries demonstrated a personal connection with the topic and relevant literature as they debated on curriculum development issues. A set of criteria was provided for the reviewing the blogging activity: critical thinking, Integration/synthesis of concepts and principles related to the topic/issue being debated upon, reflection on own experiences, writing standard and maintaining timelines. Content analysis of postings on the blogs was done using a rubric to determine the level of the discussions. Some of the topics/issues that students engaged in included transformative learning, internationalisation (globalisation) and nationalisation of the curriculum, case-based learning and problem-based learning, and evidence-based and inquiry learning.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Senate Higher Degrees Committee at the University of the Western Cape. The Registrar and the Director of the School of Nursing at the universitywere informed about the study. Prospective participants were informed that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and they were free to leave the study at any time, without prejudice. They were also informed that participation in this study would not affect their academic progress in any way, either negatively or positively. Participation in the project was not a requirement for the module and no marks would be given for the activity.

Participant information sheets were distributed, containing information on the purpose of the study, guidelines to participation in the study, voluntary participation,

ethical considerations, and also the researcher's contact details. Signed consent was obtained from each of the participants. Anonymity of the participants was guaranteed; students were informed that their names would not be divulged as relating to the reporting of the study results.

**Results and Discussion**

The four groups that were initially set up interacted quite well within their blogs in the initial stages (Stages 1 and 2). Attrition in one group resulted in the one student who was left alone being assigned to another group, resulting in three remaining groups.

The facilitator noticed that there was adequate engagement in two of the three group blogs. These two groups of students could exchange thoughts and ideas as well as share experiences in their blogs. On reflection, they expressed very positive attitudes toward the use of blogs as a platform to reflect on their learning and teaching. The blog of the third group of students was dormant, with very limited activity. This blog had posts that were entered on the first week after the training with no follow-up discussions. This group of students verbalised that they found this activity quite challenging and could not find time to post their comments on their blogs as well as on the blogs of the other students. Even after sending numerous e-mails to the members of this group to encourage them, the facilitator noticed that the level of interaction did not improve. The facilitator discussed these concerns with the members of the third group at the seminar discussions. Their main challenge was that they were part-time students working long hours at their clinical placement areas and had to juggle various activities and responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

One can conclude that there is value in this blogging activity. However, much as there was enough freedom afforded to the groups of students regarding the layout and use of their blogs, this activity proved quite challenging as one group of students could not manage to continue with the activity (Luehmann, 2008). Academics preparing educators who are interested in using blogging as a tool for learning will have an interesting challenge balancing the tension between allowing student educators sufficient freedom in the use of their blogs to capitalise on this affordance on the one hand, and giving special assignments/tasks that would ensure engaged discussions in the blogs. Says Luehmann (2008):

*These considerations suggest the value for [student teachers] educators to structure specific assignments or expectations that will encourage student teachers to tell stories of their practice in sufficient depth, use these stories as catalyst for identifying and wrestling with more general issues, and look back at what they wrote over time.*

Further research needs to be continued in the use of technological tools for enhancing collaborative and reflective learning with specific reference to how the students can be kept interested in the use of these technologies for learning.

The lessons learnt from this study are that it is important to: (i) invest more time in orientation of students to make them more comfortable and confident in using the tool; (ii) ensure that students receive ongoing encouragement and support from the facilitator; and (iii) plan for technical support so that students can be assisted timeously to avoid feelings of frustration and helplessness.

There is value in using blogs as a mediating tool for learning, because collaborative, reflective learning may be enhanced by the blogging activity with specific guidance and support provided by the facilitator of the module.

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# Critical success factors for institutionalising service-learning in a nursing programme at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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**Abstract**

Scholars in the fields of community engagement contend that the service-learning (SL) policy implementation in higher education is more likely to be successful when there is a strong institutional commitment and the policy implementation is well conceptualised. Research indicates that most higher education institutions in South Africa failed to operationalise the national SL policy, which mandates the incorporation of social responsiveness in their academic programmes. This quantitative study investigated whether a university in the Western Cape had created an enabling environment for a school of nursing to institutionalise service learning in the nursing programme. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using total sampling (n=48) to collect data on the operationalisation of the critical success factors and the stage of SL institutionalisation for each of Furco's five dimensions. Furco's self-assessment tool for service-learning institutionalisation was modified. A descriptive analysis was done using SPSS version 19. The results indicated that all of the success factors were present in the institutional structures and policies. However, the institution is perceived to be performing best in the dimensions of student support, philosophy and mission, and institutional support for SL. It can thus be concluded that the institution has created an enabling environment for mainstreaming SL in the nursing programmes.

**Keywords:** Mainstreaming service learning; nursing education in higher education, service-learning institutionalization.

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## Introduction

The concept service-learning (SL) was introduced in South African higher education when the Joint Education Trust (JET) investigated the conceptualisation and potential role of SL at higher education institutions (HEIs) in 1997–1998 (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slammat, 2008). According to these authors the interest in SL was closely associated with the transformation agenda of the new democratic government. The government was exploring ways to translate the South African constitutional values into educational discourses (Department of Education, 1997). Hence, the Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) research project was established in 1999 in response to a call of the White Paper on Education (1997) for

"feasibility studies and pilot programmes which explore the potential of community service in higher education" (Lazarus et al., 2008). The Department of Education also commissioned the development of an SL policy framework for HEIs (HEQC, 2006a). The quality assurance of SL curricula is thus regulated legislatively at national level (HEQC, 2004a, 2004c), whereas the establishment of a conducive environment for the institutionalisation of SL rests with the respective HEIs (HEQC, 2006b). However, critical self-analysis and open discourse about the status quo at HEIs (Smith-Tolken & Williams, 2011) indicated that SL was not operationalised in the institutional plans of most of these institutions in South Africa (Lazarus, 2007).

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was commended for the scope of its community engagement activities in its Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, Faculty of Education and Library Science. However, the HEQC recommended that UWC differentiate between the different types of community engagement by stipulating clear criteria for each of the types (CHE, 2007). In other words, the university needs to provide clear operational guidelines to effectively implement its SL strategy in the academic programmes. The Institutional Operational Plan 2010-2014 of this university was developed subsequent to the HEQC audit, and used to benchmark the progress made in policy formulation since the recommendation in 2008. This strategic document identifies SL as an operationalised form of community engagement (UWC, 2009).

The HEQC further stipulates that both structural and programme requirements are essential to advance and sustain SL policy, staff issues and recognition policy (HEQC, 2006a). The procedural elements of the above should be specified in the organisation's mission statement and other central policy documents to ensure that such documents articulate with the SL policies of the HEI (HEQC, 2006a). The researcher argued that the gap identified by the HEQC (CHE, 2008), namely the operationalisation of SL at UWC, is crucial for mainstreaming SL in the nursing programmes. In other words, are the necessary structures in place, which were identified by SL scholars as critical success factors for SL institutionalisation (Furco, 2002; HEQC/JET Education Services South Africa, 2006a, 2006b)?

Furco's *Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education* (2002) is the best-known developed self-assessment rubric for higher education. The instrument measures the current level of SL institutionalisation according to three stages against critical success factors for SL institutionalisation across five dimensions.

This study investigated to what extent the respondents perceived the HEQC's SL guidelines to be implemented at UWC using Furco's (2002) SL

institutionalisation stages. Specifically, the study determines if the critical success factors for SL institutionalisation summarised by Furco's five dimensions were embedded in UWC's policy documents. The second objective was to classify SL institutionalisation at UWC according to the developmental stages of Furco (2002).

The critical success factors for SL institutionalisation are specified in the five dimensions namely, philosophy and mission of SL; academic support for and involvement in SL; student support for and involvement in SL; community participation and partnerships; and institutional support for SL. These dimensions are further divided into sub-components as in Table 1. These dimensions are graded according to three stages to indicate at which level of SL institutionalisation the HEI is operating. At stage 1, the critical mass building stage, the HEI is primarily focused on building a critical mass of SL scholars and developing SL activities across the campus. During stage 2, the quality building stage, institutional activities are focused on enhancing the quality of rather than upscaling the scope of SL programmes. Stage 3 is focused on sustaining SL by institutionalising SL in the core functions and operations of the HEI.

## Methodology

A descriptive design (Burns & Grove, 2007) was used to explore and describe whether the factors for successful SL institutionalisation were embedded in the institutional structures of UWC.

The study was conducted during May and June 2011 at the school of nursing, because it is currently the largest residential nursing school in an HEI in South Africa (Jeggels, Traut & Africa, 2013). The school has positioned itself as an innovative school of nursing and midwifery in the county, and advocates a community-, problem- and competency-based curriculum (UWC, 2013).

The accessible population included 25 nurse academics, 27 clinical nurse supervisors and 7 senior academic officers in the employment of the school of nursing during the data collection phase. Therefore the total population was used (Terre Blanche, Durham & Painter, 2006).

Furco's (2002*) Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education* was used as the data collection tool to determine the status of SL institutionalisation at UWC. No permission was sought as the instrument is freely available from the public domain and the author states that "there is no one right way to use the rubric … the dimensions and components of the rubric should be adapted to meet the needs of the campus" (Furco, 2002). His rubric was used to develop the structured questionnaire and adapted based on feedback received on face and content validity from experts. The responses for

the five dimensions were converted to a Likert scale (1–3) to correspond with the three stages of Furco's rubric.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient yielded was 0.89, indicating a high internal consistency (Brink, van der Walt & Van Rensburg, 2008). The face and content validity of the questionnaire were determined by pretesting and modified based on feedback received from four academics, a statistician and the study mentor regarding clarity and conceptualisation. All questions were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 19) to provide descriptive statistics. The prescribed ethical procedures of UWC were followed and this study received ethical clearance from the Senate Ethics Committee, project registration number 11/1/37.

## Results

The key in Table 1 was used to interpret the progression of SL institutionalisation to phases 2 and 3 for the different dimensions and their sub-components.

**Table 1:** Key for staging the Furco scores of the dimensions

| Dimensions | Stage 1<br>Critical mass building | Stage 2<br>Quality building | Stage 3<br>Sustained institutionalisation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dimension 1<br>Philosophy and mission<br>Dimension 2<br>Academic support<br>Dimension 3<br>Student support<br>Dimension 4<br>Community participation<br>Dimension 5<br>Institutional support | Operational level according to Furco scores:<br>0 – 33.3%: Entry level<br>33.4 – 66.6%: Transitioning to the next stage<br>66.7 – 100 %: Established operational stage | Institutional activities for the sub-categories:<br>0 – 11.1%: None evident<br>11.2 – 22.2%: Noteworthy<br>22.3 – 33.3:% Substantial | |

## Philosophy and mission of SL (Dimension 1)

The disaggregated data in Table 2 provide a detailed overview of the level of SL institutionalisation for this specific dimension.

**Table 2**: SLinstitutionalisation stage for the philosophy and mission statement of SL

| Components | Stage 1 Critical mass building No. % | Stage 2 Quality building No. % | Stage 3 Sustained institutionalisation No. % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Definition of SL | 32 66.0 | 12 25.0 | 4 8.3 |
| Strategy for SL | 18 38.3 | 22 46.8 | 7 14.6 |
| Alignment with institutional mission | 36 75.0 | 5 10.4 | 7 14.6 |
| Alignment with educational reform efforts | 23 67.6 | 7 20.6 | 4 11.8 |

The data indicate that the university is performing best in strategy for SL because the quality building activities (22; 46.8%) surpassed the critical mass building endeavours (18; 38.3%) and it has even moved to stage 3 by receiving a score of 7 (14.9%) for sustained institutionalisation. This trend was also evident in UWC's endeavours to align SL with the educational reform efforts in strategic policy documents, as indicated by the score of 7 (20.6%) for stage 2. An interesting finding is that institutional activity for sustained institutionalisation was noted (7; 14.6%) for alignment with institutional mission, even though UWC has not yet progressed to stage 2 according to Table 2.

## Academic support for and involvement in SL (Dimension 2)

Table 3 indicates that SL institutionalisation for academic support at UWC was operating at stage 1, except for the sub-component academic leadership which has advanced to stage 2 by scoring 18 (37.5%).

**Table 3:** Academic support and involvement in SL (n=48)

| Components | Stage 1 Critical mass No. % | Stage 2 Quality building No. % | Stage 3 Sustained institutionalisation No. % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic knowledge and awareness of SL | 40 83.7 | 6 12.5 | 2 4.2 |
| Academic involvement and support | 39 81.3 | 6 12.5 | 3 6.3 |
| Academic leadership | 25 52.1 | 18 37.5 | 5 10.4 |
| Academic incentives and rewards | 40 83.3 | 6 12.5 | 2 4.2 |

## Student support for and involvement in SL (Dimension 3)

The university was performing best in this dimension and has moved to the quality-building stage, with student awareness and student opportunities each receiving scores of 22 (45.8%) stage 2.

**Table 4:** Stage of SL institutionalisation for student support (n=48)

| Components | Stage 1 Critical mass<br>No. % | Stage 2 Quality building<br>No. % | Stage 3 Sustained institutionalisation<br>No. % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student awareness | 23 47.9 | 22 45.8 | 3 6.3 |
| Student opportunities | 22 45.8 | 22 45.8 | 4 8.3 |
| Student leadership | 31 64.6 | 13 27.1 | 4 8.3 |
| Student incentives and rewards | 32 66.7 | 13 27.1 | 3 6.3 |

This trend towards building quality in this dimension was also reflected to a lesser degree for the other two sub-components, namely student leadership and student incentives and reward. The findings indicate that this dimension was the most developed critical success factor for SL institutionalisation at UWC, although there was no evident institutional activity to sustain it.

### *Community participation and partnerships (Dimension 4)*

Table 5 indicates that UWC was transitioning from stage 1 to stage 2 for community partner awareness and mutual understanding.These same components have even transitioned to stage 3. However, the institution should give more opportunity for the community partner voice and leadership which was operating at stage 1.

**Table 5**: Stage of SL institutionalisation for community participation and partnerships (n=48)

| Components | Stage 1 Critical mass building<br>No. % | Stage 2 Quality building | Stage 3 Sustained institutionalisation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Community partner awareness | 31 64.6 | 11 22.9 | 6 12.5 |
| Mutual understanding | 24 50.0 | 14 29.2 | 10 20.8 |
| Community partner voice and leadership | 38 79.2 | 7 14.6 | 3 6.3 |

**Institutional support for SL (Dimension 5)**

The Furco scores in Table 6 indicated that most components were operating at stage 1. The exceptions are the coordinating structure (16 or 33.3%), policy making strucure (16 or 33.3%), and staffing (11 or 22.9%) which obtained high scores for stage 2. The policy making structure has even transitioned to sustained institutionalisation (6 or 12.5%).

Table 6 indicates that UWC was predominantly operating at stage 1, the beginning level of SL institutionalisation for the components of funding, administrative support and departmental support, and evaluation and assessment. The exceptions were the coordinating, policy structures and staffing, which had transitioned to stage 2.

**Table 6:** Stage of SL institutionalization for institutional support (n=48)

| Component | Stage 1<br>Critical Mass<br>No. % | Stage 2<br>Quality building<br>No. % | Stage 3<br>Sustained institutionalisation<br>No. % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Coordinating structure | 27 56.3 | 16 33.3 | 5 10.4 |
| Policy making structure | 26 54.2 | 16 33.3 | 6 12.5 |
| Staffing | 35 72.9 | 11 22.9 | 2 4.2 |
| Funding | 40 83.3 | 18 16.7 | 0 |
| Administrative support | 37 77.1 | 8 16.7 | 3 6.3 |
| Departmental support | 35 72.9 | 8 16.7 | 5 10.4 |
| Evaluation and assessment | 37 77.1 | 9 18.8 | 2 4.2 |

**Discussion**

Scholars argue that SL institutionalisation is a prerequisite for promoting a scholarship of engagement in HEIs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2002). The Furco scores indicated whether the factors required for SL institutionalisation were present in the structures of UWC. These success factors correspond with the SL quality indicators of the input, process and output stages proposed for evaluating SL institutionalisation in South African HEIs (HEQC, 2006b).

*Philosophy and mission statement*

The findings in Table 2 indicated that this dimension was rated as the second most developed SL institutional dimension at UWC. The strategy for SL and alignment with educational reform efforts are leading and have actually progressed to the sustaining stage. SL thus complements many aspects of UWC's mission statement, which frames UWC as an engaged institution that advocates SL teaching methodology as a corporate strategy (Frantz, Rhoda & De Jongh, 2013; UWC 2009). This institutional claim was also externally validated in the form of the commendation that UWC received from the HEQC regarding the scope of community engagement activities (CHE, 2008). Nonetheless, these noteworthy institutional activities were reportedly peripheral and not fully

integrated into the core business of the university as nuanced by HEQC's recommendation (CHE, 2008:19) which relates to quality indicator 2.3 of institutional input which states: *"The institution's commitment to service learning is reflected in its strategic planning, with clearly defined procedures, time frames, responsibilities, reporting and communication arrangements"* (HEQC, 2006b).

The findings also concurred that the SL definition in the university's mission statement needs to be operationalised, because although a draft SL definition was formulated interpretations of the definition by campus constituencies were inconsistent according to the Furco score for the definition of SL in Table 2. This operational concern has been noted previously by UWC-based SL champions and the institutional audit report of UWC (Daniels & Adonis, 2011; CHE, 2008). These concerns confirm the national contention that the lag in implementation of the SL policy guidelines in South Africa could be ascribed to the conceptual confusion prevalent in many South African HEIs (Bender, 2008; Hall, 2010). It is therefore imperative that UWC takes cognizance of criterion 1.4 of institutional input that specifies that the mission of the HEI should give SL "due recognition" and promote SL as a "scholarly activity (e.g. in terms of a scholarship of engagement)" (HEQC, 2006b).

A clearly defined SL definition that differentiates between the different types of community engagement at institutional policy level needs to be developed, especially as the current national thinking is towards a contextually defined SL definition (Hall, 2010).These conceptual issues were also linked to UWC's strategy for SL. The findings reflected that specific SL goals needed to be formulated and operationalised in a strategic plan in order to provide implementation guidelines at the operational level of academic programmes. This concern was also voiced previously by SL experts at institutional and national level (CHE, 2008). It can be concluded that existence of a draft definition of SL and the continued SL discourse at institutional level are evidence that UWC is striving to incorporate SL into its educational reform endeavours. Cognizance is also taken that interpretation of these SL policy statements is influenced by the mind maps of individuals (Choi & Ruona, 2011).

*Academic support for and involvement in SL*

The overall Furco score for academic support was established at stage 1. Academic leadership was the outlier for this dimension, because this component was perceived to be operating at stage 2 (quality building). The score for academic knowledge and awareness of SL indicates that very few members know how SL is differentiated from other forms of community engagement activities. This finding warrants concern, especially since the draft SL definition was available for at least a decade (Daniels & Adonis, 2003) and the university is

professing SL as a teaching methodology (UWC, 2009). It is therefore imperative that a school of nursing initiate or intensify discourses about how UWC's 'engaged institution' brief can be translated at the operational level of the school's academic programmes. This seems to be a feasible strategy, as the findings in Table 3 indicate that only a few influential academics at UWC provide academic leadership for SL. An additional reason was that such a SL discourse could develop institutionalised experiences and shared assumptions in a school, regarded as foundational requirements for the organisational change associated with SL institutionalisation (Blackman & Henderson, 2005).

UWC should therefore pay close attention to the overall institutional support that it provides to develop SL scholarship among academics, because the findings in Table 6 identified this aspect as a gap in SL institutionalisation. UWC should therefore also pay attention to criteria 7 and 18 of institutional audits (HEQC, 2004a) and indicator 4 of institutional input that mandates "adequate resource allocation for delivering quality service-learning as part of the institution's core function" (HEQC, 2006b).

*Student support and community involvement in SL*

UWC was excelling in these two dimensions, in that the institution was focused on both recruitment and quality-building activities according to the findings in Tables 4 and 5. This means that UWC has made progress in terms of raising awareness among its community partners about UWC's community developmental goals through student SL projects (Furco, 2002; HEQC, 2006b). These findings are congruent with UWC's ethos of being an engaged institution (UWC, 2009). However, in spite of UWC's pursuit of "mutual understanding and reciprocity" (Furco, 2002), disparity was identified (Table 5) in terms of providing opportunities for the community voice and leadership, as stated in indicator 5 for institutional input (HEQC, 2006b). This could, however, be due to the stage of partnership development at institutional level.

The formation phase of partnership development is characterised by activities related to establishing working groups comprising key stakeholder representatives and funding issues (HEQC, 2006a). The main focus of the implementation stage of partnership development is formulation of intervention plans based on outcomes of the collaboratively defined needs assessment. Formalisation of the expectations, roles and procedures is regarded as crucial for the success of this stage (HEQC, 2006a). The last stage, the maintenance stage, is concerned with monitoring of the intervention plans, and hence requires the necessary infrastructure for feedback, skill development, etc. Issues of equity in terms of power and products are key features of the outcome phase of partnership development (HEQC, 2006a). The findings thus suggest that most of

UWC's community activities seem to reflect the implementation phase of community development.

*Institutional support for SL*

The HEQC states that both structural and programme requirements are essential to "advance and sustain service-learning policy, staff issues and recognition policy" (HEQC, 2006a:140). This dimension requires that the university should ring-fence substantial resources, support, and workforce towards the SL institutionalisation process (Furco, 2002). This dimension was rated as the third most developed SL institutionalisation success factor at UWC. Table 6 indicates that the coordinating structure and policy making structure have transitioned to stage 2, but that other aspects like funding, administrative support, departmental support and evaluation and assessment need institutional attention.

It can therefore be concluded that the respondents regard UWC as an engaged institution and concur that "engagement is integral in the ethos of UWC" (UWC, 2009) in terms of its policy structure. Recognition is also given to the coordinating structure, the Community Engagement Unit (CEU) that was established with the sole purpose of advancing and institutionalising SL on campus. However, the services were perceived to be serving only a limited constituency. This finding is corroborated byAdonis (2005), who stated that SL at UWC has since the inception of the CEU been selective in terms of capacity building for SL module implementation. The Audit Report also identified that UWC had pockets of SL and community engagement activities (CHE, 2008).

In terms of institutional process quality indicators, the findings reflect that SL is managed, facilitated and coordinated partially according to quality indicator 6.1. In terms of providing the necessary support for the development and implementation of SL, UWC is complying with criteria 7.1 and 7.3 (HEQC, 2006b).The factors that advanced SL at UWC included institutional commitment and support from the Deputy Vice Chancellor, funding of human resources, office space and scholarship development activities (Adonis, 2005). The continuous institutional commitment to SL scholarship was demonstrated recently when the Deputy Vice Chancellor's office financed 10 academics from a school of nursing to complete an accredited short course on SL and community engagement. The university has also embarked on building an effective culture of change (UWC, 2009) in that community engagement and hence SL is incorporated in the rules for academic promotions. Hence the university is relatively advanced in terms of the good practice institutional process indicators (HEQC, 2006b).

However, the findings indicate that UWC should pay attention to the funding of SL activities, because although several departments offer SL opportunities and

modules, these are not primarily supported by institutional funds (Table 6). The implication is that academics have to secure external funding, which are typically short-term and thus impacts on the sustainability of SL projects and SL scholarship. Also, an organised, campus-wide strategy to account for the number and quality of SL activities was lacking. Hence a SL quality monitoring and evaluation system specifying the institutional output and impact indicators was lacking (HEQC, 2006b).

*Benchmarking against institutional quality indicators*

The Furco scores for all five dimensions indicated that UWC has created an enabling environment for successful SL institutionalisation ( Furco, 2002; HEQC, 2006b). UWC has also moved to the quality building stage for dimension 3 (student support), dimension 1 (philosophy and mission) and dimension 5 (institutional support). However, the findings also suggested that UWC was not fully compliant in terms of the two national policy documents regulating SL institutionalisation: *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (HEQC, 2004a) and the *A Good Practice Guide and Self-evaluation Instruments for Managing the Quality of Service-Learning* (HEQC, 2006b). Therefore the major findings were benchmarked against the evaluative stages of the core functions of HEIs, as discussed below (HEQC 2006b).

*Institutional input indicators*

The institutional input indicators consist of five indicators and 17 sub items/quality criteria. Indicator 1 states that *the* "institution's mission, purpose and goals with regard to service-learning are indicative of its responsiveness to the local, national and international context" (HEQC, 2006b).The findings indicate that UWC was fully complying with indicator 1 of the institutional input indicators for development of SL, in that the mission statement and values of UWC reflect contextual responsiveness ranging from local to international communities (UWC, 2009). UWC was partially compliant in terms of indicator 2 with regard to its commitment to SL, as reflected in "policies, procedures and strategic planning" (HEQC, 2006b) as evidenced in its commitment to SL and attempts to integrate SL in other UWC policies. However, criteria 2.3 and 2.4 require institutional attention, in that strategic plans need to be converted into "clearly defined procedures, time frames, reporting and communication arrangements" and "effective mechanisms for managing the quality of SL" (HEQC, 2006b).

With regard to indicator 3, which refers to institutional leadership, management and organisational structures, the conclusion is that UWC has 'pockets of excellence', as was alluded to earlier. The scale of the accountability structures for SL is not 'campus wide' as specified. Criterion 3.3 should be strengthened so

that "institution-wide structures take responsibility for the planning, implementation and review of service-learning" (HEQC, 2006b). The institution was also not fully compliant with regard to indicators 4 and 5 of the institutional input criteria for SL institutionalisation. Indicator 4 refers to "adequate resource allocation for delivering service-learning as part of the institution's core functions" (HEQC, 2006b). Indicator 5 requires that UWC should have designated structures and processes to establish regional collaborative partnerships, clear guidelines for partnership agreements with SL partners and national networking with HEIs engaged in SL (HEQC, 2006b). However, cognizance is taken that these structures were present – even if not yet campus-wide; for example, these are available for international collaboration but to a lesser degree for the other levels.

*Institutional process indicators*

The institutional process has four indicators divided into 12 quality criteria. Indicator 6 deals with the effective management, facilitation and coordination of SL at institutional level. Reciprocity and effective coordination between UWC and stakeholders was implied by the Furco scores. However, SL is not currently accommodated in UWC's management information system as specified in criterion 6.2 (HEQC, 2006b). Indicator 7 refers to institutional support that should be adequate to support SL development and implementation. The findings reported insufficient institutional support for SL capacity building and SL implementation, despite awareness of the CEU on campus.

All four criteria of indicator 7 were identified as problematic, i.e. SL capacity building activities; SL development opportunities for staff, students and SL partners; and institutional recognition for excellence and innovation (HEQC, 2006b). However, the findings indicate that UWC has made progress in criterion 8.2 of indicator 8 which states that SL is "supported as a vehicle for academic transformation in the direction of more contextualized curricula and learning materials towards South Africa and Africa" (HEQC, 2006b). However, closer attention should be paid to criterion 8.1 in terms of providing sufficient continuous support to "*promote good practice in teaching and learning through the pedagogy of service-learning"*, and 8.3 regarding the role of community partner input and the use of appropriate assessment methods for SL (HEQC, 2006b).

Indicator 9 deals with institutional support for SL-related research. Criteria 9.1 identifies staff members and postgraduate students in this regard; 9.2 focuses on the marking of SL research findings, while 9.3 deals with creation of collaborative research opportunities across disciplines, institutions and nationalities (HEQC, 2006b). This indicator needs strengthening in terms of

coordinating the calls for teaching and learning research projects across all faculties of the university.

*Institutional output and impact indicators*

However, indicators 10 and 11 that deal with monitoring and evaluative mechanisms to measure the institutional output and impact of SL, as well as the regular review of SL policy as a coordinated event, were reported to predominantly be absent on campus. A plausible explanation is that these activities become focal points primarily during stages 2 and 3 of the SL istitutionalisation development process of HEIs.

This exploratory baseline survey was confined to one school in one of the faculties of the university, and should be extended to include the other faculties and departments of UWC.

## Conclusion

The findings indicated that UWC has created an enabling environment to institutionalise SL in the nursing programmes, because all the success factors for SL institutionalisation were embedded in the policy and organisational structures of UWC. UWC policy should formulate clear guidelines to promote good practice in teaching and learning through SL pedagogy, and monitor and evaluate all SL activities on campus.

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